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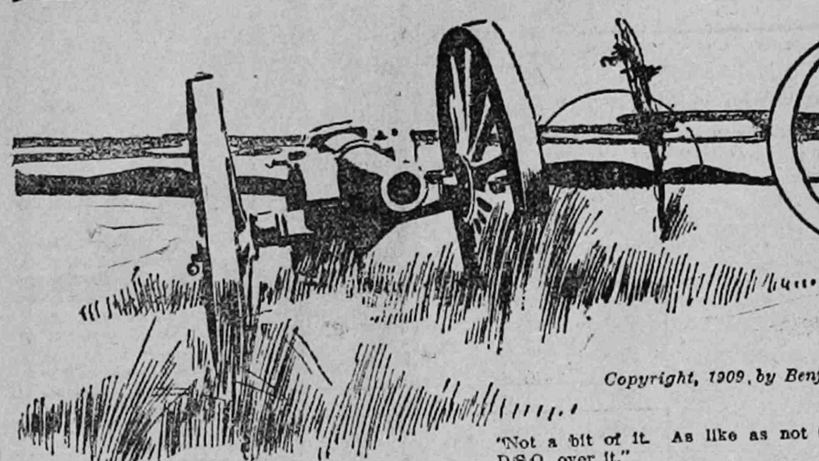

CHARTRES

BY PERCEVAL GIBBON

ON the flank of a hill above Old Shoreham the great gray house of Chartres looks south to the Channel, and at its feet, the meek river Adur comes, defeated from the Sussex downs. Gray and patient, is Colonel Tilney Wesson—Uncle Tilly of the old days—who rules deftly at the great house as the deputy of its master, keeping the servants supple, the stable ordered, and the land well stewarded till he shall have done with his affairs in Africa and return to his own place.

It was a sour day when he was summoned to Chartres. Colonel Wesson was at his club, waiting with others of his kind for the ampler evening papers. These were the autumn days following the taking of Pretoria, when the army was bushwhacking in tiny brigades and lean columns all over the stubborn Transvaal. The early cables spoke of a fight to the north of the railway by Waterfall Ouder, a sharp and desperate struggle in which the British force had suffered heavily. A gun had been lost, it was stated, but as yet there were no names. In the smoking room of the club there were a dozen or so of old soldiers, whose sons or nephews were at work in that part of the world; one terrible old man had a grandson there.

"Wonder who's been chucking guns away this time," remarked this veteran, secure in the knowledge that the youth who bore his name was a Hussar.

There was a pause. "We're in the line, at any rate," replied a Crimean general with satisfaction. Others reported to the same effect. Old Colonel Wesson cleared his throat.

"My nephew's a gunner," he said.

"Ah!" The grandfather turned a cloudy eye on him. "Horse?" he asked.

"Field," replied the Colonel gravely.

"H'm!" the veteran grunted suspiciously; several of them looked curiously at the Colonel, but he sat unmoved. He had to wait for news, of course, but he was not really anxious. His nephew was not the gun-losing kind.

The papers had not yet come when the page came into the smoking room with a telegram on a salver. He brought it over to Colonel Wesson at once. The Colonel opened it, with a dozen eyes on him, read it, and rose to his feet.

"Got to go," he said. "Boy, call me a handsom."

The grandfather of the Hussar scowled at him.

"Hang it all, Wesson," he said, explosively, "this isn't a time for delicacy. Have you got any news there? If you have, read it and be done with it. We're all in this."

Colonel Wesson smiled and spread the telegram out again.

"It's not exactly news," he said. "But it suggests there may be news. It's from Jack Chartres—my brother-in-law, you know. The gunner chap's his son."

"Well?"

"Well, it says simply: 'Come down at once. Catch 4.50. Don't fail.' Looks as if he'd heard something, eh?"

"I will," said the Colonel, and went to his cab.

He caught his train with no margin. It was on the point of moving as he scrambled into his carriage. Farther down the platform a newsboy was calling his papers; Colonel Wesson leaned from the window as the train gathered way and shouted to him.

"Evening papers," he cried. "Any of 'em. Quick!" The Colonel tossed a half crown into the basket; the boy galloping alongside the train, bundled his papers together and took aim. They caught the Colonel full in the face.

He adjusted his monocle and unfolded the first of them. The headlines barked from the page: "British Disaster; Defeat at Swartdaal; List of Casualties." The Colonel's pulse quickened a little as he settled down to read the ten inches or so of bald prose that preceded the long list of killed and wounded. It told, very formally, of a surprise at dawn, a silent commando ringing an unsuspicious camp and overwhelming it at a chosen moment. A paragraph related tersely how the little force had stood under a devastating fire, how an artillery officer had drawn out a gun and opened fire at point-blank range on the ridge from which the Boers commanded the camp. And the gun had been taken. They had got away with it.

The Colonel folded the sheet the more conveniently to read the lists that followed. Seven officers had been killed; some of them he knew; but the name for which he looked was not among them. Nor was it among the names of the wounded. But there was yet another heading. The print was blurred before his eyes as he read it. "Missing: Lieutenant John Chartres, R.F.A."

It was dark when he reached Chartres. The grave butler received him deferentially.

"Sir John's gone to his room, sir. He desires to be excused till dinner."

He possessed himself of the Colonel's bag.

"The old room, sir," he said, and led the way up the wide staircase.

The Colonel made his toilet pensively. It was the custom of his brother-in-law to send for him at all seasons of emergency, and generally he came. Sir John had been a widower for close on twenty years, and had never accustomed himself to be alone. When at length Colonel Wesson went down, Sir John met him in the garden room that gave on the terrace.

"Ah, Tilney!" said Sir John. "Feeling fit, eh? Seen the news, I suppose?"

"Yes," said the Colonel, taking a chair with discrimination. "Yes, it seems to have been a brisk little business. Gad, Jack, what a thing it is to be young!"

"The telegrams say he's missing," said the baronet. He spoke as though he were laying a problem before the Colonel.

"Rotten way of putting it, isn't it?" said Colonel Wesson. "Means they grabbed him along with the gun, I suppose. Jack, that boy's got brains. He's learnt something."

"What d'you mean?" demanded Sir John. "Learnt how to lose guns, eh?"

Colonel Wesson smiled frankly. "That's it," he said, "that's pre-cisely it. Shoved it at 'em; kept it spouting till the others could stand to their horses; probably saved the lot at the cost of one gun. A devilish smart bit of work, I call it."

The old baronet stared at him with parted lips. "Then," he said, weakly, "then it isn't—or——"

"A regrettable incident?" suggested the Colonel.

"Not a bit of it. As like as not he'll pick up a D.S.O. over it."

The baronet gulped and smoothed the back of his head with his hand. He was a little dazed for the while.

"Well, well," he said, at length, very thoughtfully. Let's hope they don't send him back without his breeches."

In this manner Colonel Wesson began his sojourn at Chartres which is not yet at an end. Ampler news of the fight duly arrived, the full story of; the man in command and the warm tales of the war correspondents. It settled down into a finished episode, with its fit perspective; and as it took shape in the public mind the part taken in it by Lieutenant John Chartres of the Field Artillery was seen to be a worthy one. He had whooped his men up and hauled out the gun by hand, staying by it and firing to the very end. Not he alone, but all the gunners with him were missing. There was praise for all of them, but no word of the whereabouts of any of them. They had vanished as completely as their gun.

"They—er—they wouldn't shoot 'em, I suppose?" demanded old Sir John from time to time. "Wouldn't do that, eh, Tilney?"

"Good Lord, no," the Colonel never failed to reply. "You've got the queerest ideas, Jack. These chaps aren't savages. Very decent fellows, by all accounts. Shoot 'em, indeed!"

But he was puzzled himself. All over South Africa the Boer commanders were releasing prisoners within a few hours of their capture. They had nowhere to keep them and no food to spare for them. The War Office was stormed to request the Commander in Chief to cause inquiries to be made, but nothing new was elicited. Day by day the old baronet became more helpless and more dependent on the Colonel for his funds of optimism.

In the warm days of the spring, six monhs after the day of the fight, now almost forgotten, the baronet delivered himself of a new requirement. His gray shaven face with the afternoon light upon it was very like a child's.

"Tilney," he said, suddenly. "That boy of mine—I hope I'll see him again."

"My dear Jack, of course you will," replied the Colonel, placidly, but with a quick look round at the old man's face.

The baronet smiled, slowly. "You don't know everything, you know," he said, after a pause.

The Colonel sighed. "That is so," he agreed.

There was silence again for a while.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Sir John. "I'm coming to my finish, Tilney—coming to the big jump. But that's nothing. I want you to do something."

"All right," said the Colonel. "You're talking bosh, of course. But go on."

"I suppose this war will finish some day," continued the baronet. "Can't go on forever, you know; it would simply ruin the Service. Well, when it does stop, that General Van Zyl will be available. I want you to go out and talk to him. He'll know what's become of Jack if anybody does."

The year grew ripe; the downs and the fields returned to their green; but the distant war abated not at all. Who shall do credit to the long patience of Colonel Wesson in those dreary months? Sir John weakened before his eyes, but never once did his endurance fail. Dapper, accomplished in social arts, a companionable bachelor, worldly and jovial, not once did the mask slip from him, though the old man must be keyed up almost hourly to the pitch of faith in the life of his son, even while a surer knowledge lived in the serenity of his eyes and the last of his days went by under his hand. Life is the greatest of the arts and Colonel Wesson was a great artist.

Then, when he had been at Chartres just a year, Sir John died. The old man flickered out quietly during the night. He had needed no help from anyone in his last and greatest undertaking. Colonel Wesson, appointed under the baronet's will to the care of everything, took charge of all arrangements.

There was before him the pledge he had given to the baronet, to go to South Africa at the end of the war and seek for the boy. Comfortably now, he put the estate in order for his departure, and awaited the day when General Van Zyl should be a fellow subject and accessible to a polite stranger. It was a long time coming; the Boers were tenacious. "Might almost be English," as the Colonel said. But at last it came, and the Colonel packed his bag and took ship.

It was a strange land he came to, a country where all perspectives were awry, and the lawlessness of war had made its deepest marks on men's minds. Colonel Wesson moved up country to Bloemfontein to find General Van Zyl. On all sides there were men who knew him and willingly aided him, and he passed up-country unhampered by the regulations that held thousands of anxious refugees fuming at the base. Arrived at Bloemfontein, there was his own corps, his old regiment, in camp, commanded by the sprightly warrior who had been Colonel Wesson's senior subaltern. Hectic hospitalities ensued.

General Van Zyl was not hard to find. Twice the Colonel called at his hotel and he was out; the third time he was at luncheon in the dining room.

The famous General looked up as Colonel Wesson approached him, detaching his attention from his food with a quite obvious reluctance. He was even portentously stout, with a big, massive head standing stiff on a short neck and a thick pointed beard finishing his chin.

"Yes. I am him," he said. "Sit down, Colonel. Sit down and have a drink."

He boomed when he spoke, so that people turned in their chairs to stare.

"Thank you," said the Colonel, "but I won't drink, if you don't mind. I have come from England to see you, sir, and to ask for your help."

"Yes," said the General, eating persistently.

"You remember, no doubt, your—your success at Zwartdaal?" asked the Colonel.

The General spluttered and clutched his napkin.

"Ach, yes; that was very funny," he agreed. "I sneaked a gun at Zwartdaal."

"Quite so," said the Colonel, eagerly. "And the gunners as well. It was about that I wished to question you, if you will allow me. The officer in charge of the gun was Lieutenant John Chartres, my nephew. We have not heard of him since."

"Eh?" The General laid down his knife. "Let me now think."

"Ach!" He grunted. "Yes, now I remember it. Yes!" He laughed again, briefly. "That, too was very funny. But I let them go. I did not keep them. No!"

"You released them? You are sure?" asked the Colonel.

"Sure! Yes! Man, why would I keep them? Allemachtig, I was feeding myself on old mealies and trek oxen; I had bellies enough to feed without prisoners. I let them go next day. But at first they wouldn't go. It was very funny.

The General leaned back in his chair to laugh at the memory. The Colonel watched him gravely.

"I am very anxious to find that boy, sir," he said. "It means a great deal to me. It would be a kindness if you would tell the story to the end."

The General wiped his eyes with his napkin and composed himself.

"Ach, there," he said. "After a war, one laughs at everything. I was forgetting. Well, that young officer, he didn't want to go without his gun. I didn't want his gun. But to give it back to the English for them to shoot their lyddie at me—that was not war, eh? That was too much. I said to him he could go back. He said there was a time for everything and he would toss me with a sovereign for the gun. That was why I laughed just now. But I was moving east, and I could not trek the gun over those rocks. So one night I left it behind with a feldkornet from Ermelo and twenty burghers, and told them to go north and find a nice kloof to hide it in, and if I wanted it again I could fetch it. He didn't find out that it was gone till next day."

"You mean my nephew didn't?" put in the Colonel, quickly.

"Yes," said the General. "The young officer. He come to me when we halted to make coffee at noon. 'I'm off,' he said. His men were standing behind him. 'Are you going after the gun?' I said. Then he laughed and all his men laughed. 'It would be rather a lark,' he said. 'Good-by, General,' and then he went off with his men.

"The Colonel Clung to His Arm and Laughed—Laughed Helplessly and Long."

"We were camping by a piece of kloof," continued the General, and reached for the gear on the table. "Like this—between the dish and the bottle. And I was here by the salt. They went off by the kloof, and then I heard somebody howling, down here in the kloof. Then there was a shot and some of my burghers came running."

He laughed again. "They were very angry, my burghers," he explained, "and they told me with curses. The young man and his Tommy Atkinses had walked through the camp, saying good-by to the burghers, and by and by they came to where old Oom Coetzee, with his sons and his nephews, were boiling their kettle by the edge of a bit of bush. 'Now, men,' said your lieutenant, 'help yourselves,' and the Tommies fell on the rifles and bandoliers with a laugh, and ran into the bush. It was all done while a man could spit twice, and then they were lost in the thorn trees. It was Oom Coetzee that howled. They jumped up to chase the soldiers, but at once there came a shot out of the bush and drilled a hole through the kettle. Then they ran to me."

This time Colonel Wesson answered his frank laughter with a smile. He was beginning to understand this General. A man who can laugh at himself, be he peasant or soldier, has no limits. He is a sportsman.

"And what did you do?" asked the Colonel.

"Ach, me!" The General shrugged his big shoulders. "I laughed. They were gone from sight through the bush and up into the rocks. They could sit on stones and shoot us one by one as we came. There was nothing to do, so I laughed."

The Colonel produced from his breast pocket a folded map of the Transvaal.

"You've been most kind, General," he said, as he spread it out on the table and held a gold pencil hovering over it. "I'll go up to the place itself and see if I can find any traces. So if you'll help me to mark the places on the map, I shall be eternally obliged to you."

"Ach, that is easy. Give me the pencil."

And in a couple of minutes the thing was done.

Colonel Tilney Wesson got into his clothes with haste, under the shelter of a boulder that poised on the hillside, and stepped forth clad among his shivering Kaffirs. To the south, the camp looked forth over a world crumpled abruptly in little ranges, slit as with a sword by precipitous valleys, and tufted here and there with patches of wachteen-beetje thorn. His route had lain across it, with the ultimate mountains, at whose feet he was now camped, ever before him.

He was traveling on the stale track of the gun. It was fully two years since he had sat at the table in Bloemfontein with General Van Zyl. Since then he had never ceased from searching. He knew that young John Chartres and his men had gone in pursuit of the gun. Kaffirs, Boers, prospectors, and others had seen him—two years ago. He was in a country now where no guide could serve him, the almost virgin wilderness of the northwest, and his path, pointed to him by a dozen indications, lay straight to the great rocky face of the range, up it and over it. He had found no man to tell him what lay the other side. But hope was strong in him, and the traveling afoot, the chances of the trek, and the air had restored to him some of his youth. He was well and strong and an optimist.

He broke camp as soon as breakfast was eaten, and led the way briskly for the ascent. It was very slow going; the bearers, roped to their packs, tailed off forthwith and made pauses to lament. All were weary and caked with parching dust long before the noonday halt in a little dip, where a small pool invited them to rest; and still the hill towered over them and its final peaks stood remote as ever.

They were feeding dully about the pool when Colonel Wesson leaped to his feet with a hand uplifted.

"Hark!" he cried, and the startled Kaffirs listened.

Very far away, dim and attenuated, some sound traveled to them from the unknown land beyond the range. It was barely a murmur, but low-pitched, metallic, and echoing.

"Good God!" cried the Colonel; "the gun!"

There was no doubt of it; distant though it was, strewed over miles of air, the sound that jerked him to his feet was the voice of a cannon.

"What the deuce!" cried the Colonel to the uncomprehending Kaffirs. "What the deuce! They can't have ammunition to last forever. Get your load up, you boys. You can eat another time."

And he hustled them to start again.

It was late that night when the little party camped again. All day and far into the darkness they had struggled on, and came at last, tottering on their feet, through a slope of rocks to the crest of the mountain.

"Camp here," ordered the Colonel. The Kaffirs dropped where they stood and lay gasping. The Colonel stood and gazed into the night for the gleam of a fire. He saw none.

The downward road which they took next morning was easier work than the upward climb, but not much faster, for they had to thread the thorn bushes.

Late in the afternoon they found themselves in a belt of high grass—grass which stood seven feet or more, through which they had to push in single file. Each man could see just the back of the man before him; the Colonel at the head could see not even that. Their advance through the rustling, breaking stalks filled their ears, but of a sudden the bearer who walked behind the Colonel caught at his coat.

"Baas!" he said, and made an ear trumpet of his hand.

The small procession stopped, and forthwith the Colonel heard, unmistakably, the noise of men advancing in the grass at some little distance.

The others, whoever they might be, were close at hand. He could distinguish separate footfalls. And then suddenly some one spoke.

"Careful, men!" he said. "Look out for snakes."

The Colonel gasped and began to tremble. Parting the grass stems before him, he moved forward uncertainly and stood face to face with a tall man in rags and a beard. The stranger laughed pleasantly.

"Hullo, Uncle Tilly," he said; "who'd ha' thought o' meeting you?"

The Colonel clung to his arm and laughed—laughed helplessly and long, not daring to stop lest he should break into weeping.

It was not far into camp. A hollow by a spring gave shelter from the evening wind and thither the young man led the Colonel, his gaunt, tattered men following with the Kaffirs.

The Colonel and his nephew sat apart by their own fire when they had fed. John Chartres was enjoying an Egyptian cigarette as only a man can who has smoked uncured leaf for two years. The news of the death of Sir John had already been communicated.

"Now, Jack, what have you got to tell me?" demanded the Colonel at last.

The young man smiled meditatively. "You seem to have ferreted out most of the story yourself, Uncle Tilly," he said. "There's nothing much left to tell."

"You really didn't know the war was at an end! You'd heard nothing of it?" persisted Uncle Tilney.

The younger man laughed. "No," he answered. "On my word, I hadn't. It didn't occur to me. And d'you know, Uncle Tilly, I'm afraid I can't take the information from you. You're not official, you know. You're just a daily tourist."

"But, my dear boy," the Colonel protested, "you can't keep this up forever."

Lieutenant Sir John Chartres lit another cigarette and crossed his long legs comfortably.

"Why not?" he demanded. "Look at my chaps over there. All as tough as steel wire and as happy as grigs. They don't want to go back without that gun. They've thought of nothing else for two years. Look at 'em!"

The Colonel turned his head and looked. About the fires the fourteen men were seated smoking his plug tobacco. One of them was leading an argument, with a vivacious hand waving to drive home his points.

"Yer can't trek yer gun if yer got to 'aul it with a team of cows," he was saying. "A gun's made to move, an' move quick. Yer might as well not 'ave wheels to it as tow it around with a team of cows."

"Always the bloomin' gun, you see," remarked young Chartres. "An I'll give it to you straight, Uncle Tilly; I'm goin' to take that gun back with me."

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm going to take it back with me," repeated young Chartres. "Old Piet Grobelaar's got it over there and I'm goin' to take it from him. He fires it now and again, just to remind me, confound him."

"Where does he get his ammunition?" queried the Colonel.

"He hasn't got any," was the reply. "He's got a little blasting powder, that's all. He loads her up with that and touches her off to annoy me. But I'll get her one of these days. We've both got a fair lot of rifle cartridges, you know. There was a cache of them down south, and Piet was helping himself when we came up and took about half of the lot. With luck they'll last another six months."

"And then?"

"Oh, then we'll fight with the butt, I suppose," said Chartres, and grinned pleasantly.

The Colonel shook his head and pondered. There was a spell at work in that remote place. Things seemed reasonable and possible there, which must have appeared outrageous in a more ordered environment. The fires threw their light on the harsh, ragged men and made a hollow of enchantment in the solemn night. He could feel the magic working and fought against it.

"There'll be a hell of a row in London about it," he said.

Chartres looked at him quickly. "Who cares?" he answered. "What's London, anyhow?"

"I seem," said the Colonel slowly, "to have been led into talking as though there were any sense in this fatuous project of yours. It was a mistake. The standards of unexplored Africa are insane standards. You owe it to yourself, to Chartres, and to me—to me, sir—to recover your senses and come back to the world. What the deuce! You've wasted two years of your life, thrown away your career in the army, grown a beard, and you ask me what's London, anyhow. I never heard such impudence in my life!"

"Go it, Uncle Tilly!" said Chartres, composedly. "Work it up. Toss your tail and snarl. I don't mind."

The Colonel looked at him fixedly and sighed. "You be hanged," he said. "But honestly, Jack——"

John Chartres interrupted: "Honestly, Uncle, I'm coming back when I've got that gun, not before. All you say is quite right; it's a crazy business, mad, absurd, maniacal, demented, rabid—anything you like. A man's always a fool to work hard. I'm a fool, if you please. So don't waste good talk. You go back and take charge of Chartres for me till I've come. Will you do that?"

"I'll stay and help you," suggested the Colonel, but John Chartres would have none of it.

"Don't spoil sport," he said. "Ride your own line, Uncle, and don't foul me. This is my picnic, if you please."

They talked far into the night, and in the end the magic prevailed. The grass lifted its raw scent to their nostrils; a jackal howled from a kloof, and even as they sat at their fire the night was rent with the high booming roar of a lion by the stream below.

"I must get that chap," said Chartres. "He's always hanging around."

Colonel Wesson threw up his hand with the gesture of a defeated man.

"Oh, get the cursed gun," he said. "Get it and come home."

"That's a bargain," said young John, cheerfully.

It is very peaceful at the great house of Chartres, sitting sturdily on its hillside, and the land about it has yet that note of unconquerable patience—the grim quietude of endurance that broke the Romans and conquered the Normans and made the English. Still patient, gray, and urbane is Colonel Tilney Wesson, waiting through the years for Sir John Chartres to recover his gun and come to his own between the downs and the sea. And he knows that one day he will come. He will haul the old gun at the tail of a team into Pretoria, redeemed and faithful again, and return through the laughter of a joke-loving nation to set Colonel Wesson free from his post